

School Choice-Preference or Personal Responsibility

Good Morning, my name is Brian Davis. I am the Superintendent of Schools for the largest urban school district West of Grand Rapids in Holland, Michigan. I appreciate the opportunity to share my testimony to you today advocating for traditional public education and sitting before you here today in opposition to Senate Bill 618.

I will not be talking to you today about the impact of lifting the cap on charter schools will have on the retirement system; special education; federal resources like Title I, II or III; the research cited by Kati Haycock from the Michigan Education Trust; performance of charter schools in comparison to traditional public schools; the dilution of resources available to schools from community centers, hospitals, police departments/public safety, community of mental health, parent and faith-based volunteers; or examples of in my opinion unethical practices that are happening in some of the charter schools in Holland, Michigan. Instead, I would like to talk with you about my own personal experience.

Recently I bought a new car. I decided to go with General Motors. Now that I have my car, I have a problem within our state. The condition of the roads in Ottawa and Allegan County is unacceptable. The potholes are numerous. I have decided that I want a new highway infrastructure. In fact, my preference is, I want my own road to drive on. I want a road free of bicyclists, pedestrians, motor cycles, individuals who drive less than 55 and those over 85 and I also want a road free of tailgaters. I don't want to have to pay an additional fee for my road and I certainly don't want a commute that is not a direct path to my destination. This is my preference. I don't want I-96 to commute to Lansing, I want my own I-618. I would prefer to have my own infrastructure of highways built for me but I know that this is just not responsible. Arguably the roads are in need of repair but no one would chose to build a new road system alongside existing infrastructure, sentencing the old road to even further decay. The wise and responsible choice is rebuilding, not abandoning.

As many of you, and your colleagues in Congress, we decided to invest in the Big Three Automakers during their most challenging times. A very intentional and strategic direction was charted with very specific rules of transparency and new accountability standards defined by the government. An investment was made by our country and our taxpayers in a system that we believed in and that we knew could work in an era of new accountability and much needed reform. Thankfully, the government did not decide to open 150 new Automakers across our country without a tried and true method of manufacturing that has been built upon determination, hard work, innovation, and tradition.

If you have followed my metaphor, you will note a direct correlation to what you are considering relative to Senate Bill 618 by removing the cap on charter schools. You are placing preference before responsibility.

I am currently working on my Ph.D. and the title for my dissertation is "Why mothers chose traditional public education during times of economic stress, public school criticism, and reform." As part of my literature review I have learned many things about why different demographic groups participate in choice while others do not. I would really encourage you to read the 2008 policy brief by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice. This policy brief supports other research of its kind and the well documented phenomenon of "White Flight." White parents tend to avoid schools with high minority concentrations, and minority parents tend to avoid schools with high percentages of low-income students, leaving school systems with

often low-performing poor children in urban centers. In fact, families of color will surprisingly leave schools that reflect diversity to attend a school predominately white with hopes of escaping poverty. As a result, school choice programs have the potential to contribute to an already racially and economically segregated system. As an administrator in Holland Public Schools for 11 years, I can show you the white flight phenomenon that has been in existence in our community. We are somewhat unique as we are an urban school district nestled in a suburban community. Why is the poverty rate of our school system at almost 70% and the demographics of our community less than 15%. There is a lot that can be learned from us. Look at any large urban school district in our state and you will see a similar pattern that has occurred over time.

In 1998, Reay & Ball examined family dynamics embedded in school choice and found that class, gender, race, and generational status all contribute significantly to choice options that are made. Interestingly enough, they found that families from lower socio-economic status actually preferred local schools as do their children. This was all related to a sense of security, safety, and relationships. Studies of Latino families in other countries and here in the states site the destruction of families and community relationships from school choice initiatives. This happens as families within neighborhoods no longer attend the same school systems under this era of personal preference and abandon their local neighborhood schools. Studies actually site the "white mother mafia syndrome" where children are shuffled from school to school, program to program and teacher to teacher with the goal of admittance into ivy league schools. This concentration on personal preference, individualism and self-interest, moving away from a neighborhood school results in the systematic denial of what is important as part of a working class experience, the value of strong comfort, familiarity, security, and connection from being part of a community. Community brings solidarity, shared experience, and security. It is seen as a way to bring stability and predictability during uncertain times. I would like to position the assumption that part of the problem in our state and country is the destruction of community. As Superintendent in Holland, I have worked very hard to restore the sense of community in our city and city school system.

According to results shared at Hope College during the 2010 Summit on Racism, I learned that I already live and work in one of the most segregated states in our nation and one of the most segregated counties in our state. This legislation before you has the potential to further segregate our schools into haves and have nots and dilute the necessary resources that are needed for schools like Holland Public Schools.

Recently you have passed legislation that has provided many tools for school reformers like myself that have never been available before. I see great potential in many of these initiatives if implemented well. What we need to do now is to meet these new standards and expectations and invest our resources wisely as has the Big Three.

In May, 2010 I was able to pass a \$73M bond to invest in the infrastructure of our school system built upon a vision that all kids can learn. We established clear learning expectations for 21st century learning and a commitment to invest in the economic development of our community to position ourselves as a leader in talent development in our region. This millage was passed during an economic recession with over 14% unemployment, declining property values, even

after a 35% decline in enrollment, closure of 9 elementary schools, and reorganization of our district grade level infrastructure three times. We have been recognized by *US News and World Report*, the Mackinac Center, the *Bridge*, the Michigan Department of Education, and the Michigan Association of School Administrators for our work and efforts in beating the odds. If we can do it, I know that others can too. We experienced a growth of over 100 students this year and our Schools of Choice applications are up 30% after experiencing a decade of decline. This was not based upon school choice alone, it is based upon a strong vision, clearer standards and accountability supported by research: Schmoker, Reeves, Fullan, Marzano, Wagner et. al. It is based upon a continuous improvement model that has engaged the business and manufacturing community, higher education and non-profits through models like New Tech and VR-Tech High School.

The opening of more schools in our state is not dictated by increased student enrollment or additional resources available to schools. Advocates say it is based upon failing schools and the need to provide more choice options to families. It should be based on increasing academic achievement. The model to increase student achievement must be based upon proven track records of high transparency and accountability.

I have lived in a choice environment for over a decade and I continue to witness the devastating impact on demographics and I can point to examples across this state of where it has occurred in other urban school districts. I have personally witnessed the impact on community for personal gain and self-interest.

What could you be doing as legislators? Demanding performance and high expectations. Shame on the individuals who were on watch that allowed some of our largest districts to fall into the disrepair that they are today. As a change agent, I am frustrated by legislation that is establishing policy through the lowest denominator of performance and using these districts as the example and now encouraging for profit franchises to come into our state and open more schools without accountability to academic achievement. You should be looking to your department of education and identifying the best practices that are in place across our state and country and replicating them in our most challenged schools, not tearing them apart by putting in more charter schools through a process of little accountability or oversight.

You are not making this job any easier for true education reformers like myself. An individual recently recognized as the Michigan State Superintendent of the Year for 2011 based upon the work that I am doing with a team of committed individuals in Holland, Michigan to serve all children. Representative Price can vouch for my work in Holland and the work that we have done to instill community ownership, academic achievement, and strategic direction for our traditional public schools connected with business and manufacturing. Continued efforts to dilute resources, instill practices not based upon research, and one-size fits all legislation based upon the least common denominator will drive away the talent that we have in public education today; not to mention this is counter productive to the collaborative sharing model and economy of scale that is being proposed to more effectively utilize the resources that we have. It is already difficult enough to find individuals with the talent and courage to step forward and serve in the manner that must be done especially in urban school districts like Holland. Work with me, and not against me. Create conditions with me that can support my sense of personal responsibility and ensure that all children receive quality education in the neighborhoods in which they live and the traditional public school systems in their neighborhoods. Finally, hold all

failing schools: private, traditional public, home-schooled, and public school academies that are failing accountable to student achievement for all students.

I truly understand your preference. No one prefers to have any failing schools in Michigan and you desire to have all students receiving quality education with high levels of performance. We already have more than enough schools in our state to support the educational need. What I believe you need to do is to exercise personal responsibility and hold your schools in place accountable for achievement.

Please vote now on Senate Bill 618.